



NATHANIEL BRANDEN

A WOMAN'S SELF-ESTEEM

STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS
THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY



A Woman's Self-Esteem

STORIES OF STRUGGLE,
STORIES OF TRIUMPH

Nathaniel Branden



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A Woman's Self-Esteem

*To Ashley Victoria Zerah, for the day
when this book may speak to you.*

—from Grandpa

Preface

The book focuses on the basics of self-esteem and the application of self-esteem principles to the everyday lives, conflicts, and strivings of women.

Not in any sense a scholarly work, it is closer to being a primer, with the focus not on humankind in general, as with my previous works, but on women in particular.

The stories that I tell of women's struggles and victories to illustrate my points are taken from my experiences as a psychotherapist. These vignettes are the heart of this book. But in addition, the book contains exercises aimed at facilitating personal development and growth in self-esteem. The emphasis here is on *action*.

Contrary to the claim of some critics, interest in the subject of self-esteem is not "an American fad." It is exploding in one country after another around the globe—from Russia to South Africa to Malaysia. In the fall of 1997,

I was scheduled to do some corporate work in Singapore. In anticipation of my visit, I was invited, in partnership with my wife, Devers, who is also a psychotherapist, to create an evening for the general public on the theme of women and self-esteem. No one knew how many people would come. When the auditorium in which we were to speak was filled—its capacity was six hundred—two hundred additional people were led into an adjoining room where they could witness the event on a television monitor. Another five hundred people were turned away because there was nowhere to seat them. The audience appeared to be about 90 percent women and 10 percent men, and consisted of Singaporeans, Chinese, Japanese, Malaysians, Vietnamese, and a small scattering of Caucasians. The interest in self-esteem was passionate. The most frequently asked question seemed to be some variant of, “How do I find the courage to fight for my own development, against family and cultural pressures?” They did not project that they saw themselves as victims nor did they suggest that man was the enemy. They wanted to know what they could do on their own behalf. What became abundantly clear as the evening progressed was that growth in self-esteem entails a challenge to one’s courage. That is one of the themes of this book.

When working on self-esteem, there are two aspects to be considered. One has to do with healing childhood traumas and psychic wounds that have resulted in a dam-

aged sense of self—in other words, the elimination of negatives. The other is the building of positives: learning those practices and ways of operating that result in a strengthened sense of competence and worth. The latter is our focus here.

Whereas the first concern often requires psychotherapy or some other form of professional help, the latter is a domain that a motivated adult can pursue on her own, for example, by studying and experimenting with the ideas and suggestions advanced in this book. Having worked with people for four decades, I am convinced that most of us tend to underestimate what we are capable of accomplishing. We are all more than our problems.

I want to express my appreciation to Alan Rinzler, editor for this project, for seeing the possibilities of this book almost from the first moment of discussion, for his helpful ideas on the book's organization, and for his enthusiasm, which makes working with him such a pleasure.

My second (happy) debt of gratitude is to my wife Devers, passionate supporter and severe critic, who teaches self-responsibility and non-victimhood to her female therapy clients (to her male clients too), and who is my favorite sounding-board for discussions of female psychology.

July 1998
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NATHANIEL BRANDEN

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PART ONE



The
Basic Steps

CHAPTER ONE

The Importance of Self-Esteem

 Self-esteem is a basic psychological need. And although there is a good deal of talk about it today, there is very little understanding of what the word *self-esteem* actually means.

On a television show, we hear someone say, "When he didn't show up for our date, my self-esteem was *shattered*." In a film about love, seduction, and betrayal among French aristocracy in the eighteenth century, we hear one character say to another, "I wanted you from the first moment I saw you. My self-esteem demanded it." Advertisers tell us that if we use a particular soap, our self-esteem will benefit.

The danger is that a very important idea will become trivialized. And yet, of all the judgments we pass in life, none is more important than the judgment we pass on ourselves.

That judgment has an impact on every moment and every aspect of our existence. Our self-evaluation is the basic context in which we act and react, choose our values, set our goals, and meet the challenges that confront us. Our responses to events are shaped in part by who and what we think we are—in other words, by our self-esteem.

Self-esteem is the disposition to experience ourselves as being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and as being worthy of happiness. It consists of two components: (1) self-efficacy, that is, confidence in our ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions and (2) self-respect, that is, confidence in our right to be happy—confidence that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love, and fulfillment are appropriate for us.

“The basic challenges of life” include such fundamentals as being able to earn a living and take care of oneself in the world; being competent in human relationships, that is, able to sustain relationships that more often than not are satisfying to oneself and to the other party; and having the resilience that allows one to bounce back from adversity and persevere in one’s aspirations.

To say that self-esteem is a basic human need is to say that it is essential to normal and healthy development. It has survival value. Without positive self-esteem, psychological growth is stunted. Positive self-esteem operates as, in effect, *the immune system of the spirit*, providing resistance, strength, and a capacity for regeneration. When